

It Is to Be Hoped That Proper Grammar Can Endure

SEPT. 6, 2012

These are sad times for grammatical purists.

One can forgive the usual assaults on the language that characterize political debate across the spectrum: Those are to be expected. But I have been stewing for months -- months! -- over the decision by the [Associated Press](#), for a century the vaunted exemplar of proper journalistic usage, [to amend](#) its style guide to allow its dwindling stable of reporters to use the adverb “hopefully” as a synonym for “it is to be hoped that.”

The decision has provoked [outrage](#) and [mockery](#) among grammarians. Defenders, some rather [influential](#) in the world of letters, have argued that the AP has merely adjusted its editorial policy to the way nearly everyone who speaks English seems to talk anyway. This is mere sloth. We are rewarding those whom the wondrous wordsmith William Safire used to call “the fuzzy-uppers of our language” for no reason other than that we find it too much trouble to learn our own language.

During my undergraduate term as managing editor of the Stanford Daily, I enforced the style guide with a will. Reporters complained, wanting to know what difference consistency made. My answer, then as now: If we can’t agree about the small things, we’ll never agree about the big ones.

Precisely Right

Rules of grammar and usage assist us in expressing ourselves with precision. Precision in language leads to precision in thought. If we tend to be sloppy nowadays in our arguments -- and we do -- one reason is surely the growing sloppiness of our language.

When opponents mock a politician’s struggles with grammar, they are appealing implicitly to a shared understanding that this sloppiness is wrong. And they’re right. The rules define not only our language but also ourselves. That’s why so many parents over the years -- including my own -- have insisted that their children speak English correctly. Proper grammar, to borrow from Arthur Schlesinger, serves as our passport.

Enforcing the rules of grammar is one of the ways we teach the young that rules exist -- and that their existence must be cherished and protected. That’s why, for example, so many observers have drawn analogies to the rules of grammar in proposing rules for the moral calculus.

The most famous proponent of the analogy was [Adam Smith](#). In “The Theory of the Moral Sentiments,” Smith wrote: “The rules of justice may be compared to the rules of grammar; the rules of the other virtues, to the rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition.” His point was that the rules of grammar “are precise, accurate, and indispensable,” and the rules of composition “loose, vague, and indeterminate.” Morality should be modeled on grammar, he argued, so that we may have “certain and infallible directions for acquiring it.”

The theory works only if our rules are indeed “precise, accurate, and indispensable.” One way of keeping our expression precise and accurate is to keep our adverbs, adverbs. This is a point grammarians should remember.

Alas, the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary long ago caved on “hopefully,” although the earliest example they have been able to dig up is from 1932. The editors add primly that the usage they approve is “avoided by many writers.” Webster’s Unabridged concedes that “some strongly object” to the use of hopefully “as a sentence modifier.” The editors might have left off at that point, but they preferred

to argue back, assuring us that the misuse dates to the 1930s, and lecturing us dissenters: "This use of HOPEFULLY is parallel to that of certainly, curiously, frankly, regrettably, and other sentence modifiers."

Greatly Helpful

Ah. That certainly clears matters up. Curiously, the editors do not list any adverbs that haven't become sentence modifiers. Frankly, the list would include nearly all of them. Regrettably, the editors seem to confuse analogy with identity. Ferociously, battles over misuse are likely to continue. Placidly, compromise might be possible. Radically, the more probable course is that the shrinking core of traditionalists will continue to dissent.

Safire, although he yielded on "hopefully," nevertheless wished for a better word. He suggested "hopably," but the word has never existed. (The Google Ngram Viewer [yields](#) a perfectly flat line.) According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, the word "hopingly" is attested as a sentence modifier from 1755, but no exemplars appear later than 1883. "Hopingly" has lately cropped up in a few [online](#) dictionaries, and appears to be acceptable in Scrabble.

Like last year's kerfuffle over the reported [demise](#) of the "Oxford comma," the battle over "hopefully" is part of a larger problem. Linguists and philologists have long debated exactly how language changes; right now, the language is changing for no good reason.

Edwin Newman, a great among crusty grammarians -- he never yielded on "hopefully" -- sets out in his book "Strictly Speaking" a long list of errors replacing traditional constructions no less simple: "importantly" for "important," "convince" for "persuade," "troop" for "soldier," "different than" for "different from."

Pondering the process through which one simple word long regarded as wrong replaces another long regarded as right, Newman cites Gresham's Law, that bad money drives out good. He adds dryly: "That, however, does not explain the case; it merely states it." The best he is able to offer by way of actual theory is that people want, as he puts it, "the latest in thing." He adds: "But that leaves the question of how the latest in thing came to be."

Even if one finds "the latest in thing" too precious, notice that Newman quite properly doesn't write "begs the question," another atrocious but popular misusage. To beg a question is to evade it or take the answer for granted. A question that arises from the answer to another hasn't been begged, although it may have been raised.

The question that much of the debate over the use of "hopefully" prompts is whether proper grammar and usage matter in what we are wont to call the larger scheme of things. I think they do. We live in complicated times, and our constant desire for simplicity and change can only weaken our ability to cope. Already we are replacing subtlety and evidence with slogans and applause lines. In [George Orwell](#)'s "1984," it was the state that constructed a language incapable of complexity. In 2012, we are doing it ourselves.

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Carter, Stephen L. "It Is to Be Hoped That Proper Grammar Can Endure." *Bloomberg.com* [New York] 06 Sept 2012, Opinion. Web. 30 Sep. 2012. <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-09-06/it-is-to-be-hoped-that-proper-grammar-can-endure.html>>.

1. What is the author's purpose?

2. Who is the intended audience?

3. **Write a paragraph explaining your point of view about the topic.** (What is the topic? What do you think about the topic? The answer to these questions should be your topic sentence for you paragraph. Why do you think this way about the topic? The answers to this question are your supporting sentences.)